

THE COLLABORATIVE KICKOFF

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Keynote speaker Dr. Richard Florida, Carnegie Mellon's Heinz Professor of Economic Development, talks about the importance of art and culture to the city's long-term economic health. (Photo by [Mark Greenberg](#))

City and community leaders come together to discuss cultural planning, programming, and funding

During the Work Session at last week's "Finding Ways: A Conference on Art, Culture, and Development in San Antonio," symphony musicians underlined dollar signs on their complimentary notepads. One read: "\$\$, money, \$\$\$, funding." And they were not alone. Many members of the local arts community - painters, writers, teachers - listed increased financial support as the first priority for improving the city's cultural resources.

More than 450 participants, from the Greater San Antonio Hotel/Motel Association to Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS), attended the conference, which officially kicked off a two-year cultural planning process that will set the course for arts growth and funding well into the next decade. Anticipation ran high as the open seating brought disparate players together: Margaret Ann Lara of the McNay Art Museum sat at a table moderated by Graciela Sanchez, director of the Esperanza Center, and representatives of the San Antonio Housing Authority talked with transportation bureaucrats.

"I think this whole process that the city has begun is gonna build a broader, more in-depth constituency for the arts," commented Bexar County judge Nelson Wolff (no relation to the author), who is co-chair of the cultural planning steering committee.

Guided by professional facilitators, participants raised topics from corporate motives in funding arts education to greater outreach to "Joe Six-Pack." But underlying all of the conversations was the question of money. San Antonio has had a contentious history with arts funding, exemplified for many by Esperanza, which successfully sued the city in 1998 after it denied the group money for hosting gay/lesbian arts events. While questions of diversity and what constitutes cultural programming are sure to be hot at some point during this process, many community leaders appear to agree with Blue Star board president Marc Wiegand, who says the real challenge is "not how we divide the pie, but how we make the pie bigger for everyone." And San Antonio faces tough challenges in all areas of arts financing - corporate, foundation, governmental, and individual donations.

According to a 2000 report by the Waco-based Perryman Group, San Antonio ranks either last or second to last among the state's major urban areas by most arts funding indicators, whether it's government grants or corporate gifts. In a year when Houston nonprofits received \$4.6 billion in charitable dollars for the arts, for instance, San Antonio organizations received a mere \$1.6 billion. While San Antonio enjoyed steady economic growth throughout the '90s and is home to four Fortune 500 companies, no less than three major cultural institutions have faced potential financial ruin in as many years.

The Perryman report also found that for every \$1 spent funding cultural activities, a community receives a \$298 cultural impact. "The nonprofit arts are an incubator of our culture," the author wrote, "a catalyst for future prosperity." While cultural investment pays off economically in the long run, he noted, it is difficult to wean cities from the short-term glamour of wooing large corporations with economic incentives. Echoing Perryman, local non-profit board members have voiced skepticism that a city leadership so long committed to tax abatements and cash handouts for projects like the PGA Village and the Dallas Cowboys training camp would put their political muscle behind arts programming.

When it comes to private foundation dollars, the arts often play second fiddle to social service programs. In 2002, for example, the Kronkosky Foundation gave \$10.54 million to social service programming compared to \$2.94 million to arts and culture applicants. Felix Padrón, director of the Office of Cultural Affairs and the driving force behind the cultural plan, says one of his goals for the process is reshaping the priorities of the city's funders. "In order to foster well-rounded individuals," he argues, "we've got to get away from prioritizing social services over the arts."

More than 90 percent of the Office of Cultural Affairs Arts Funding Program is generated by the 16.75 percent hotel/motel tax, which some say unfairly makes arts money dependent on the city's tourism industry. Malena Gonzalez-Cid of Centro Cultural Aztlán expressed frustration with the "heads in beds" test that the Hotel/Motel Association insists be applied to revenue from the tax. On the other side of the coin, Henry Feldman, President of the Hotel/Motel Association, said he thought individuals and corporations needed to "step up to the plate" and any additional Hotel/Motel support should come through direct marketing.

The Perryman findings are bolstered by an overnight sensation, author Richard Florida, whose book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, has added a much-appreciated selling point to pleas for greater cultural investment. The conference's keynote speaker, Florida has built a compelling case that the prime indicator of a city's success in the 21st century information-based economy is the extent to which it is able to attract and retain a talented workforce. That workforce in turn tends to choose a home based on factors other than employment - a sense of energy and cultural hipness - that both professional researchers and casual observers agree Austin, for instance, has, and San Antonio has not.



Local artist Kathleen Trenchard (left) discusses techniques involved in traditional Mexican papercutting with conference attendee Genny Kosub Kraus (right) in the Creative Exchange Resource Room during Finding Ways. (Photo by [Mark Greenberg](#))

Florida sums up the indicators that attract these generally younger workers to a city in three points: the Bohemian index, which is the percentage of artists and other cultural workers in a city; diversity, which includes different lifestyle and appearance choices as well as ethnicity; and history or authenticity. But doesn't San Antonio get straight As in these categories?

Florida also noted that for the new economy workers, a symphony might not be as important as a Jimi Hendrix Music Experience Project (as is currently being built in Seattle by the other Microsoft founder, Paul Allen).

Former mayor Lila Cockrell, who currently serves as president of the San Antonio Parks Foundation, wasn't convinced that Florida's shoe fits every urban foot. "The hard fact is that unless you are a city that immediately is a glamour city in terms of some of the attributes he mentioned, you're in competition with many other cities," she observes. The key is diversification, says Cockrell, who sees health care and tourism as essential parts of San Antonio's economy, as well as the arts and technology-based industries. She adds that the city needs to continue to work on bringing up the educational and training level of the existing population.

With so many issues to tackle, community members have expressed concern that the planning process could devolve into a two-year talk-a-thon with no hard results. To counter this fear, Padrón is pushing the Steering Committee to approve ideas for implementation as early as next Spring. With Padrón's support, co-chair Wolff has already introduced a voluntary employee contribution program for arts funding, inspired by a model he observed in Cincinnati, Ohio. Corporations that agree to participate in the program would support payroll deductions that would funnel into an independent 501(c)(3) organization with its own board and grant-making mechanism. Wolff thinks one of the key benefits of such a program would be an increased sense of ownership and participation in local programming.

"All of a sudden they've bought themselves into the arts," Wolff argues, "and then they may be buying tickets and going to events."

Padrón expressed cautious optimism at the participation and positive response so far. The Steering Committee alone is at over 80 members, though there are still some empty seats at the table. "The major corporations could benefit from being here," he says. "We can learn from them, and they can learn from us." But Padrón also believes that the fate of the city's cultural resources

rests on more than funding. The initiatives that are ultimately endorsed by the Steering Committee, he says, are, "to be implemented and shared by everyone." •

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